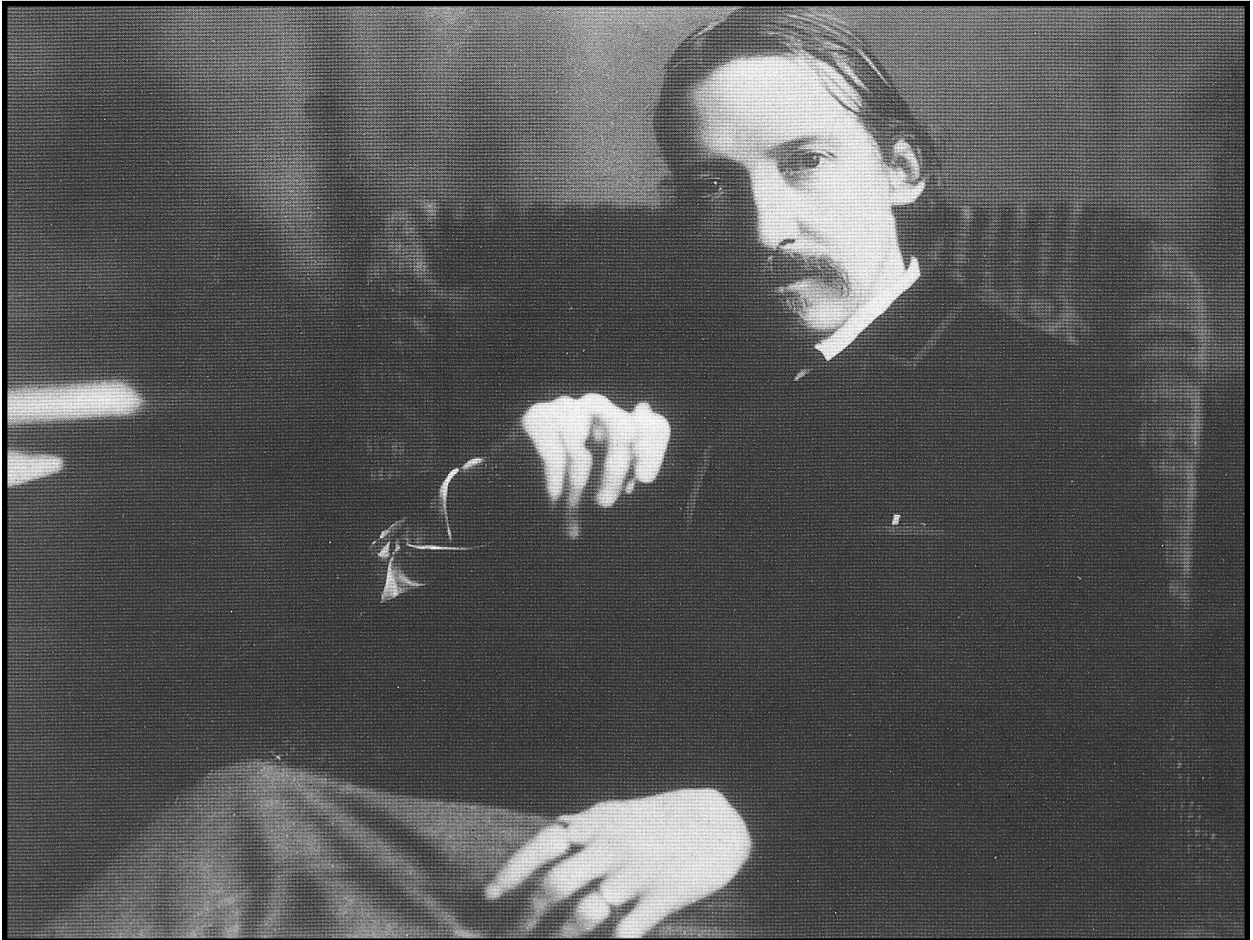


ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON: CHAMPION OF FREEDOM



by
Robert K. Stevenson

Ebook Edition: August, 2010

“At the sight that met my eyes, my blood was changed into something exquisitely thin and icy. Yes, I had gone to bed Henry Jekyll, I had awakened Edward Hyde.” Literature buffs instantly recognize who wrote these words: Robert Louis Stevenson, one of the all time great Champions of Freedom. “Super storyteller, I’ll agree; but, Champion of Freedom?” you wonder. Precisely! For this beloved author of *Treasure Island*, *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and other masterpieces also penned the following:¹

No man can settle another’s life for him. It is the test of the nature and courage of each that he shall decide it for himself.

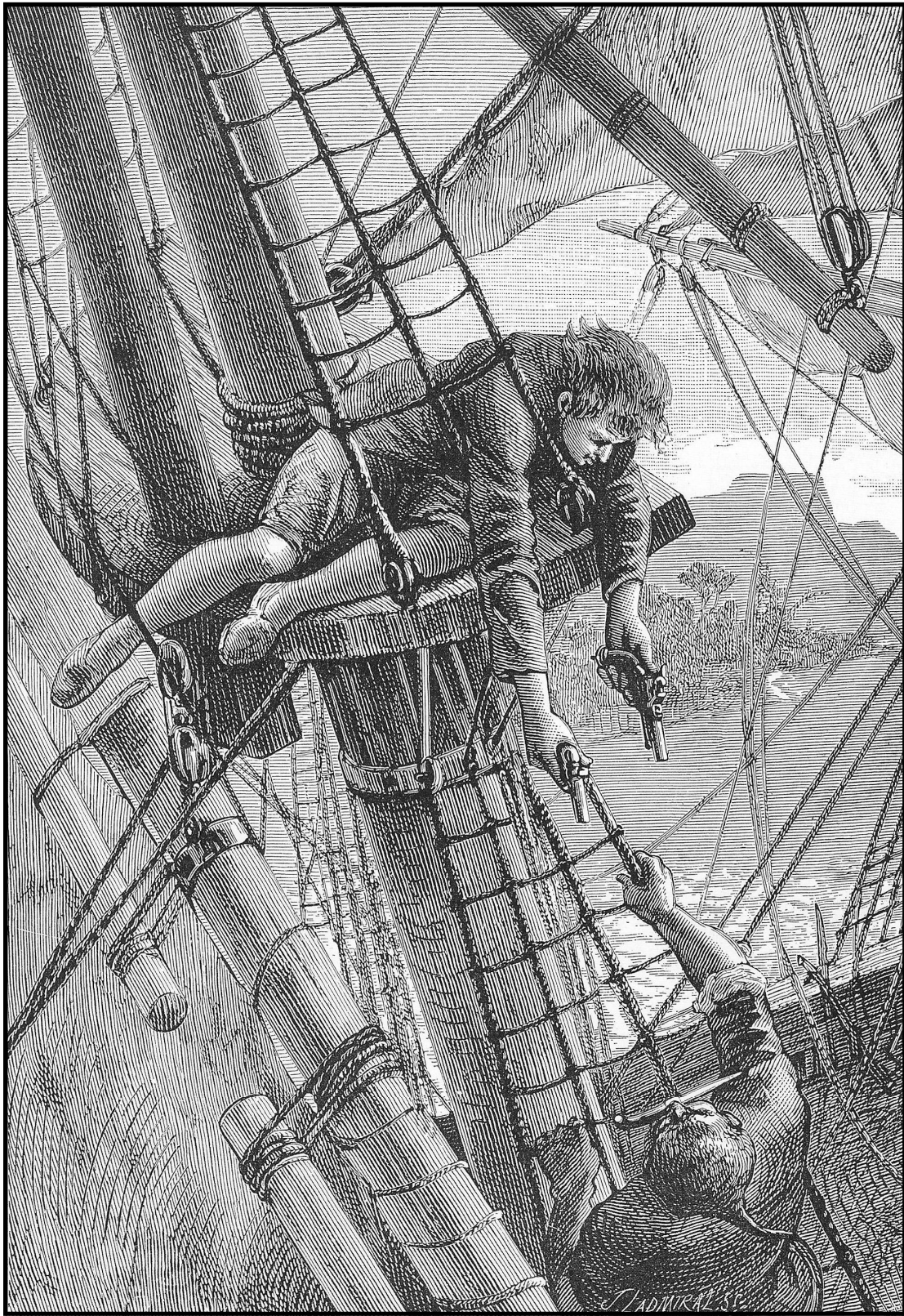
In fact, Robert Louis Stevenson’s writings are replete with such sayings extolling the virtues of self-responsibility. That this is so becomes understandable when we study RLS’s life, a tale more inspirational than any he wrote.

Robert Louis Stevenson was born November 13, 1850 in Edinburgh, Scotland to Margaret and Thomas Stevenson. Louis, as his parents called him, was Margaret and Thomas’s only child. As a youngster, Louis suffered from one serious illness after another—bronchitis, gastric fever; and so on. The times he hovered near death were innumerable. But, the boy held on; two major factors were responsible for this. First, Thomas Stevenson was a successful engineer who could afford the best medical care for his son. Second, Louis’s extraordinary nurse, Cummy, constantly lavished the child with love and attention.

Cummy’s impact on Stevenson’s life cannot be overemphasized. She kept Louis’s mind off his misery, the dreariness of lying in bed day in and day out, by continually *reading to him*. Nowadays RLS’s nurse might have turned on the TV, and considered her job done. But, would Stevenson—without Cummy—have developed into the remarkable writer he later became?

Because of his poor health, which plagued him most of his life, Louis didn’t enter school until he was seven years old. The school was a private school, kept by a Mr. Henderson. As for Louis, he didn’t know yet how to read! It’s easy to imagine how current day educationalists would respond to Stevenson’s case: they’d immediately throw him in a special audiovisual class for slow learners (a program massively funded by the federal government, of course), while at the same time prosecuting his parents under the truancy law for “gross neglect” and “intentional withholding” of their son from the public school system.

Fortunately, Stevenson grew up in a more humane environment. Whenever the family was away from Edinburgh on vacation, or Louis was too sick to attend school, Margaret and Thomas brought in tutors to help instruct their son. As a result, the boy’s “reading disability” soon disappeared; in fact, he became an over reader! How come the big turnaround? The answer clearly rests in the educational philosophy Stevenson’s parents put into practice. Margaret and Thomas always had Louis enrolled in private schools or learning from tutors. One tutor, described by RLS’s mother as “a disappointment,” either resigned or was dismissed—it’s unclear which. Still, the incident illustrates the flexibility contained in a system that places primary responsibility for the child’s education in the parents’ hands. The child learns at an optimum pace; and parental pride, manifested in the form of loving prodding and careful



*“One more step, Mr. Hands,” said I, “and I’ll blow your brains out!
Dead men don’t bite, you know,” I added, with a chuckle.’*

J. L’Admiral
(1885)

Illustration from Treasure Island, completed in 1883 by Robert Louis Stevenson

"DAILY MAIL" SIXPENNY NOVELS

DR JEKYLL & MR HYDE
WITH OTHER FABLES

Robert Louis Stevenson



E P

A popular paper-cover edition

selection of school and instructor, generally ensures that the pace is brisk.

As Louis grew older, literature increasingly became a passion with him. He sometimes skipped classes so he could walk through town or the countryside and write down his impressions. *On his own* Stevenson struggled to master his eventual trade. He realized there were no shortcuts to attaining excellence. The old farmer Gottesheim, in *Prince Otto*, reflects this belief of Stevenson:

“I have been fifty years upon this River Farm, and wrought in it, day in, day out; I have ploughed and sowed and reaped, and risen early, and waked late; and this is the upshot: that all these years it has supported me and my family; and been the best friend that ever I had, set aside my wife; and now, when my time comes, I leave it a better farm than when I found it. So it is, if a man works hearty in the order of nature, he gets bread and he receives comfort, and whatever he touches breeds.”²

Interestingly, Stevenson’s father did not consider writing to be a suitable occupation for his son. Thomas tried to interest Louis in becoming an engineer like himself; when that failed, he made his son attend law school. RLS passed the bar, but he cared nothing for a career as a lawyer. A writer, young Stevenson proclaimed, he would be!

This decision, made at age 24, did not go over well with Thomas. Even so, Louis’s parents aided him in his attempt to make a name for himself as a writer; however, the financial support was hardly generous. Compared to the welfare benefits our present government would bestow on Stevenson, it rated a pittance. But, the “budget plan” financial backing RLS received from his folks was one of the best things that happened to him. It made him strive all the harder to perfect his art and produce a best seller; for Louis was *accountable to people he loved*. As he wrote in his essay entitled *Beggars*:

We should wipe two words from our vocabulary: gratitude and charity. In real life, help is given out of friendship, or it is not valued; it is received from the hand of friendship, or it is resented.³

Stevenson obviously felt obligated to turn his parents’ assistance into a winning investment. He wrote to his mother:

Money.—I am much obliged. That makes £180 now. This money irks me, one feels it more than when living at home. I think of all this money wasted in keeping up a structure that may never be worth it—all this good money sent after bad.⁴

One wonders how many similar letters of gratitude the local Welfare Office has ever received. Stevenson’s best sellers were still a few years away, but he did manage to get many of his early works published. This meant he required less and less support from his parents. RLS’s first published book was *An Inland Voyage*, written when he was 26. In it he firmly contended that one, over the long run, could not get something for nothing:

There is nothing but tit for tat in this world, though sometimes it be a little difficult to trace: for the scores are older than we ourselves, and there has never yet been a settling day since things were. You get entertainment pretty much in proportion as you give.⁵



Frontispiece from Stevenson's first book, an account of a canoeing trip in Belgium and France with his friend, Walter Simpson.

An Inland Voyage

Walter Crane
(London, 1878)

In 1879, when he was 29, Stevenson crossed the Atlantic and the United States to marry Fanny Van de Grift Osbourn. His travelmates during the trip happened to be emigrants whose Socialist bent and poor grasp of reality Stevenson thought little of. He recorded the emigrants' simplistic opinions in his book *The Amateur Emigrant*:

At bottom, as it seems to me, there is but one question in modern home politics, though it appears in many shapes, and that is the question of money; and but one political remedy, that the people should grow wiser and better. My workmen fellow passengers were as impatient and dull of hearing on the second of these points as any member of Parliament; but they had some glimmerings of the first. They would not hear of improvement on their part, but wished the world made over again in a crack, so that they might remain improvident and idle and debauched, and yet enjoy the comfort and respect that should accompany the opposite virtues; and it was in this expectation, as far as I could see, that many of them were now on their way to America. But on the point of money they saw clearly enough that inland politics, as far as they were concerned, were reducible to the question of annual income; a question which should long ago have been settled by a revolution, they did not know how, and which they were about to settle for themselves, once more they knew not how, by crossing the Atlantic in a steamship of considerable tonnage.⁶

Lasting Improvements

Unfortunately, we still see this same muddleheadedness today in our Congressmen and much of the public. As they say, what else is new? For clearly, the lesson mankind most frequently forgets is this: the only valuable and long lasting improvements are those which are made for the individual *by the individual himself*. Stevenson lived by this code, and devoted more than his fair share of time trying to impress it on others. He believed one of the lowest levels of moral degradation was that of an otherwise healthy person living off the labors of another.

Fanny Stevenson noted of her husband: "While he could see no royal road for others, the path for himself showed plainly enough before him, and it was his duty to swerve neither to the right nor the left. He believed he had no rights, only undeserved indulgences. He must not eat unearned bread, but must pay the world, in some fashion, for what it gave him—first, materially, then in kindness, sympathy, and love."

As RLS observed in his essay, *Letter to a Young Gentleman*:

To give the public what they do not want, and yet to be supported: we have there a strange pretension, and yet not uncommon, above all with painters. The first duty in this world is for a man to pay his way; when that is quite accomplished, he may plunge into what eccentricity he likes; but emphatically not till then. Till then, he must pay assiduous court to the bourgeois who carries the purse. And if in the course of these capitulations he shall falsify his talent, it can never have been a strong one, and he will have preserved a better thing than talent—character.⁷

In 1883 Stevenson completed *Treasure Island*. The public instantly fell in love with the story, and Louis had finally made his mark. Publishers vied for his works. RLS's literary output from this point on provided all the income his family required; he no longer needed any financial support from his parents.

Personal Achievement

There are many reasons why Stevenson became the favorite author of many. That his literary talents were unsurpassable, and his works the product of genius, critics readily acknowledge. But, the main theme of his stories—the theme that through personal initiative and courage anyone can achieve his goal—seems to explain best why he captured the hearts of his readers. In *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*, and most of RLS's other novels we see the elements of danger and adventure uppermost. The hero usually has to overcome several misfortunes and death-defying experiences before capturing the grand prize: treasure, a wife, wealthy estate, or the like. Jim Hunter in *Treasure Island* and David Balfour in *Kidnapped* both beat long odds on *their own*, albeit with a touch of luck here and there.

The year 1886 saw publication of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, one of Stevenson's two best short stories. RLS wrote all 60,000 words of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in 6 days—and while seriously ill! During these 6 days, according to his wife, “he was suffering from continual hemorrhages, and was hardly allowed to speak, his conversation usually being carried on by means of a slate and pencil.” Yet, Stevenson, with incredible determination, produced a masterpiece.

One year later, in 1887, Stevenson's essay *The Day After Tomorrow* was published. In it RLS denounces the Socialistic trends of his time, and speculates on what awaits future generations who put their faith in collectivism. The prophecies appearing in *The Day After Tomorrow* have come about so unerringly, Stevenson must be ranked alongside Tocqueville as one of the 19th Century's most outstanding possessors of prevision. At one point Stevenson states:

Once eliminate the fear of starvation, once eliminate or bound the hope of riches, and we shall see plenty of skulking and malingering. Society will then be something not wholly unlike a cotton plantation in the old days; with cheerful, careless, demoralised slaves, with elected overseers, and, instead of the planter, a chaotic popular assembly.⁸

The world we live in today could not be better described. In any occupation deadbeats now seem the rule rather than the exception. Save for the work force of a few bastions of free enterprise—notably Taiwan, Japan, and Korea—modern day jobholders display proficiency and enthusiasm for but one task: punching in and out the time card.

In another section of *The Day After Tomorrow* Stevenson issues a warning similar to that contained in Frederic Bastiat's famous tract, “What Is Seen and What Is Not Seen”:

The landlord has long shaken his head over the manufacturer; those who do business on land have lost all trust in the virtues of the shipowner; the professionals look askance upon retail traders and have even started their cooperative stores to ruin them; and from out the smoke wreaths of Birmingham a finger has begun to write upon the wall the condemnation of the landlord. Thus, piece by piece, do we condemn each other, and yet not perceive the conclusion, that our whole estate is somewhat damnable. Thus, piece by piece, each acting against his neighbor, each sawing away the branch on which some other interest is seated, do we apply in detail our Socialistic remedies, and yet not perceive that we are all laboring together to bring in

YOUNG FOLKS PAPER.

FOR OLD AND YOUNG BOYS AND GIRLS.

VOL. XXVIII.—No. 805.] Printed and published by the Proprietor, JAMES HENDERSON, at Red Lion House, Red Lion-court, Fleet-street, London.—May 1, 1886.

[PRICE ONE PENNY:
by Post, Three halfpence.]



"THAT IS THE HOUSE OF SHAWS!" THE WOMAN CRIED. "BLOOD BUILT IT; BLOOD STOPPED THE BUILDING OF IT; BLOOD SHALL BRING IT DOWN. SEE HERE!" SHE CRIED AGAIN. "I SPIT UPON THE GROUND AND CRACK MY THUMB AT IT! BLACK BE ITS FATE!"

KIDNAPPED;

OR, THE LAD WITH THE SILVER BUTTON

By ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON,
Author of "Treasure Island," "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll," &c.

CHAPTER I.

I SET OFF UPON MY JOURNEY TO THE HOUSE OF SHAWS.

WILL begin the story of my adventures with a certain morning early in the month of June, the year of grace 1751, when I took the key for the last time out of the door of my father's house. The sun began to shine upon the summit of the hills as I went down the road; and by the time I had come as far as the manse, the blackbirds were whistling in the garden lilacs, and the mist that hung around the valley in the time of the dawn was beginning to arise and die away.

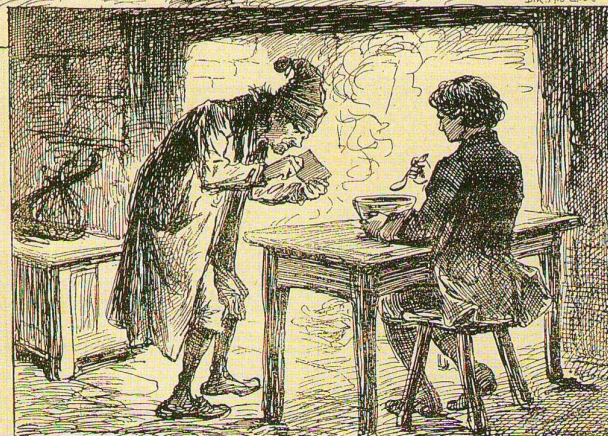
Mr. Campbell, the minister of Essendean, was waiting for me by the garden gate, good man! He asked me if I had breakfasted; and hearing that I lacked for nothing, he took my hand in both of his and clapped it kindly under his arm,

"Well, Davie lad," said he, "I will go with you as far as the ford, to set you on the way." And we began to walk forward in silence. "Are ye sorry to leave Essendean?" said he, after a while.

"Why, sir," said I, "if I knew where I was going, or what was likely to become of me, I would tell you candidly. Essendean is a good place indeed, and I have been very happy there; but then I have never been anywhere else. My father and mother, since they are both dead, I shall be no nearer to in Essendean than in the Kingdom of Hungary; and to speak truth, if I thought I had a chance to better myself where I was going, I would go with a good will."

"Ay?" said Mr. Campbell. "Very well, Davie. Then it behoves me to tell your fortune; or so far as I may. When your mother was gone, and your father (the worthy, Christian man) began to sicken for his end, he gave me in charge a certain letter, which he said was your inheritance. 'So soon,' says he, 'as I am gone, and the house is sold up and the gear disposed of' (all which, Davie, hath been done), 'give my boy this letter into his hand and start him off to the house of Shaws, not far from Cramond. That is the place I came from, he said, 'and it's where it befits that my boy should return. He is a steady lad,' your father said, 'and a canny goer; and I doubt not he will come safe and be well liked where he goes.'"

"The house of Shaws!" I cried. What



"DO YE KEN WHAT'S IN IT?" HE ASKED, SUDDENLY. "YOU SEE FOR YOURSELF, SIR," SAID DAVID. "THAT THE SEAL HAS NOT BEEN BROKEN."

had my poor father to do with the house of Shaws?"

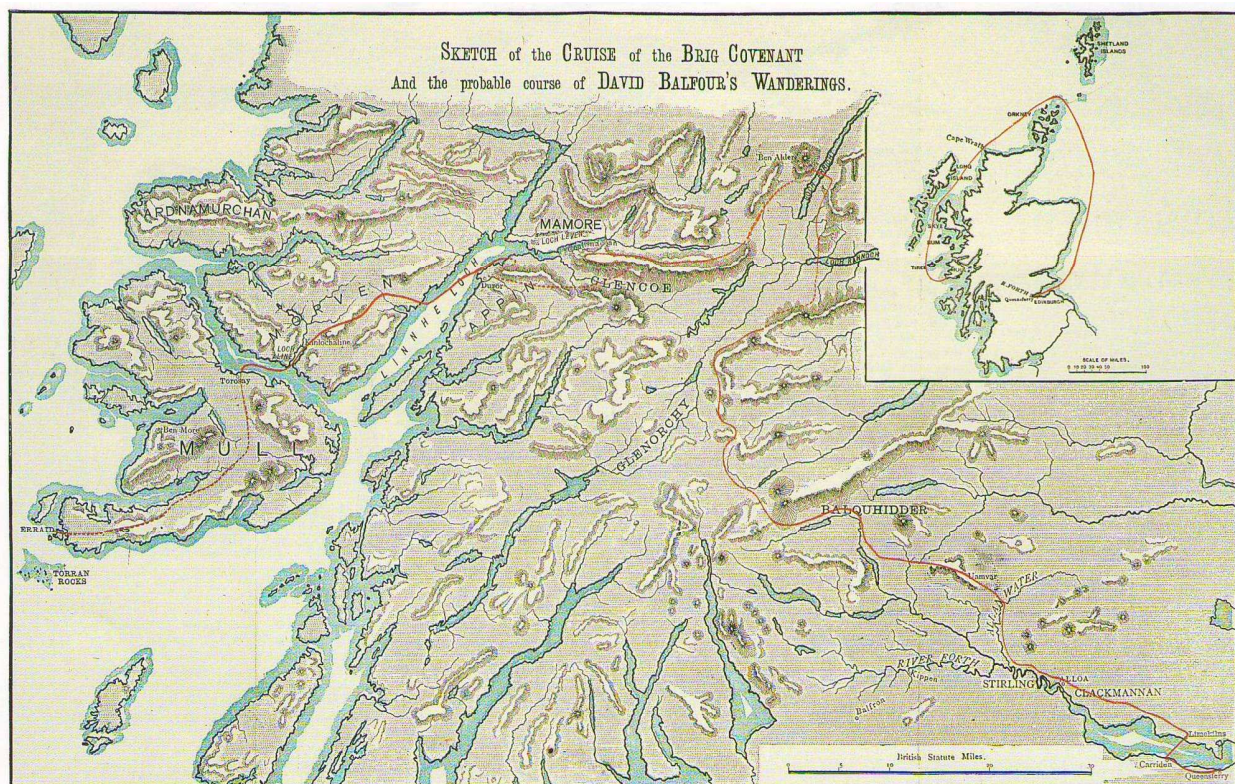
"Nay," said Mr. Campbell, "who can tell that for a surety? But the name of that family, Davie boy, is the name you bear—Balfours of Shaws; an ancient, honest, reputable house, peradventure in these latter days de-

cayed. Your father, too, was a man of learning as befitted his position; no man more plausibly conducted school; nor had he the manner or the speech of a common dominie; but (as ye will yourself remember) I took aye a pleasure to have him to the manse to meet the gentry; and those of my own house, Camp-

Like *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped* made its first appearance in this popular storypaper, though this time *Kidnapped* was the lead story in the *Young Folks Paper* (1 May 1886).



The fight in the roundhouse, from the *Young Folks Paper* (22 May 1886)



The map of David Balfour and Alan Breck's wanderings which, like the *Treasure Island* map, has accompanied each successive edition of *Kidnapped*. This map is from the first English edition (London, 1886).

Socialism at large. A tendency so stupid and so selfish is like to prove invincible; and if Socialism be at all a practicable rule of life, there is every chance that our grandchildren will see the day and taste the pleasures of existence in something far liker an ant heap than any previous polity.⁹

The Day After Tomorrow forms one of the crown jewels of classical Libertarian thought. But, what inspired Stevenson to write it? Some clue is found in RLS's essay, *Crabbed Age and Youth*, written when he was 25. In this essay Stevenson admits that he had once been "a red-hot Socialist with a panacea of my own." But, he proclaimed he wasn't ashamed of his past, for "if St. Paul had not been a very zealous Pharisee, he would have been a colder Christian." Stevenson concluded his discussion of why he changed from a Socialist into what he called a "Conservative" by stating:

I seem to see that my own scheme would not answer; and all the other schemes I ever heard propounded would depress some elements of goodness just as much as they encouraged others.¹⁰

To the South Seas

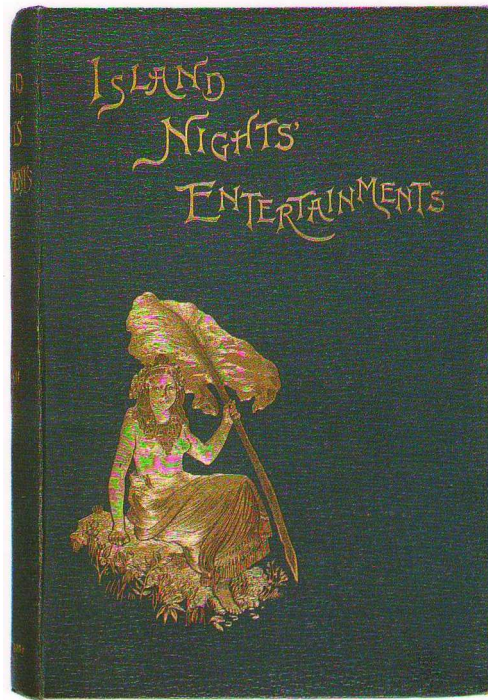
Thomas Stevenson, who had been in declining health for years, died in 1887. Louis, to his own physical detriment, had stayed in Scotland and England much of this time so he could be near his father. With Thomas's death RLS no longer had to stay and endure the cold, damp British climate. A friend had suggested to Stevenson several years before that he move to the South Seas; the islands, the friend assured, would give him robustness and vitality. Louis finally acted on this wise counsel. After making many stops at various island groups, Stevenson and his family, in October, 1890, made their home in Samoa on the island of Upolu.

True to his friend's prediction, Stevenson's health dramatically improved. His daily routine at Vailima (RLS's estate) usually consisted of 10 hours devoted to literary projects, which were sandwiched around garden work and lengthy discussions with the Samoan chiefs. On top of this, it was not unusual for Stevenson to write upwards of 30 letters a day.

Critics maintain RLS's literary output during this period constitute his most maturely expressed and crafted works. Although it hardly seemed possible, Stevenson, now in his 40's, was improving as a writer! With the creation of *The Beach of Falesá*, a short story unrivalled in suspense and characterization, RLS reached the summit of literary perfection. In achieving this, however, Stevenson did not forget to promote his Individualist convictions. In one part of *The Beach of Falesá* he castigates those who cut corners in life:

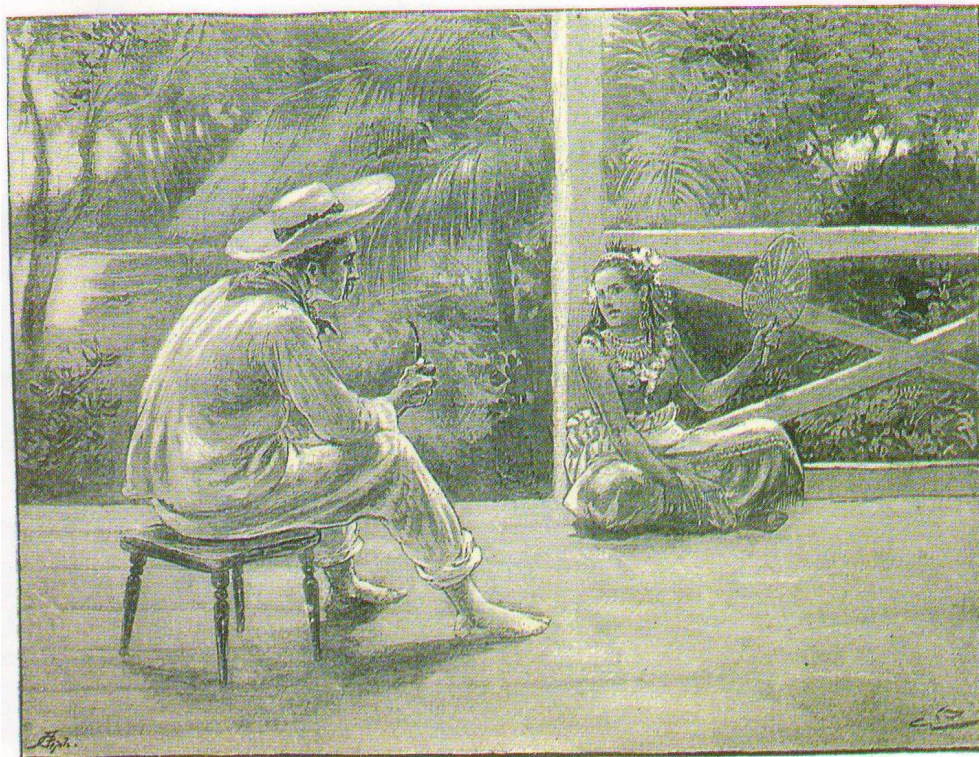
They talk about looking for gold at the end of a rainbow; but if a man wants an employment that'll last him till he dies, let him start out on the soft job hunt. There's meat and drink in it too, and beer and skittles, for you never hear of them starving, and rarely see them sober; and as for steady sport, cockfighting isn't in the same county with it.¹¹

Stevenson, in this quote, refers to the numerous beachcombers he had seen on his travels in the South Seas. These freeloaders had both fascinated and sickened him with their moral shallowness. Stevenson's book, *The Ebb-Tide*, is a fictionalized account of the beachcombing scene; but, the major point RLS makes in *The Ebb-Tide*—that the end of the line *or rope* eventually greets those who duck honest work—falls in the nonfiction category.



Cover of *Island Nights' Entertainments*, first edition.

Gordon Browne and W. Hatherwell
(1885)



““What does fussy-ocky mean?” I asked of Uma, for that was as near as I
could come to it. “Make dead,” said she.’

‘The Beach of Falesá, in *Island Nights' Entertainments*.

Gordon Browne
(1885)

Political Activity

Stevenson, when he settled in Samoa, immediately immersed himself in local politics. At the time the Germans, English, and Americans were wrestling with one another for control over Samoa. Stevenson's loyalties, though, rested with the fourth faction—the natives! The white men, meanwhile, so bungled their home government's plans to make Samoa into a colony, one didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Stevenson certainly must have done both; he also did everything in his power to assist the Samoans in their battle to retain their liberty.

For example, he gave liberal sums of money to the Samoan chiefs to help finance the resistance; he wrote letters to *The Times* exposing the Great Powers' ludicrous machinations in Samoa; and finally, Tusitala (Teller of Tales), as the Samoans fondly called RLS, compiled all the grubby details into a book, *A Footnote to History*. As often happen with people who vigorously advance the doctrines of liberty and self-determination, Stevenson found himself in hot water with the authorities. The High Commissioner in Fiji nearly charged him with sedition; fortunately, the Home Office in London interposed, thereby letting Stevenson off the hook.

That Stevenson's efforts on behalf of the Samoans were appreciated by them would be an understatement. In September, 1894 several chiefs were released from prison. These men did not at once return home; instead, they went straight to Vailima and began work on the road that led from Stevenson's house to the public way. Tusitala had helped them when they were in prison, and this is how they wished to repay him. Stevenson was extremely moved by this gesture, for as he described it, "it is road making, the most fruitful cause (after taxes) of all rebellions in Samoa."¹² He was well aware of the unpopularity of road making to Samoans.

In October the road was completed, and Stevenson thanked the chiefs in the most stirring speech of his life. RLS was to die suddenly two months later on December 3, 1894 of a stroke, an event which occasioned tremendous grief in Samoa and around the world; but, his untimely departure is not the thing to remember Stevenson by. Rather, we should recall his irrepressible spirit by pondering the ringing words the Teller of Tales delivered to the road workers:

"And who is the true champion of Samoa? It is not the man who blackens his face, and cuts down trees, and kills pigs and wounded men. It is the man who makes roads, who plants food trees, who gathers harvests, and is a profitable servant before the Lord, using and improving that great talent that has been given him in trust. That is the brave soldier; that is the true champion; because all things in a country hang together like the links of the anchor cable, one by another: but the anchor itself is industry."¹³

—FOOTNOTES—

¹Robert Louis Stevenson, “Letter to Trevor Haddon,” *The Works of R. L. Stevenson*, Vol. 21 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1923), p. 123.

²*Ibid.*, *Prince Otto*, Vol. 5, p. 350.

³*Ibid.*, “Beggars,” Vol. 12, p. 280.

⁴*Ibid.*, “Letter to Mrs. Thomas Stevenson,” Vol. 20, pp. 224-25.

⁵*Ibid.*, *An Inland Voyage*, Vol. 1, p. 127.

⁶*Ibid.*, *The Amateur Emigrant*, Vol. 2, pp. 312-13.

⁷*Ibid.*, “Letter to a Young Gentleman,” Vol. 12, p. 352.

⁸*Ibid.*, “The Day After Tomorrow,” Vol. 4, p. 459.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 453-54.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, “Crabbed Age and Youth,” Vol. 2, pp. 70-71.

¹¹*Ibid.*, *The Beach of Falesá*, Vol. 15, p. 325.

¹²*Ibid.*, “Letter to Sidney Colvin,” Vol. 23, p. 430.

¹³*Ibid.*, “Address of R. L. Stevenson to the Chiefs on the Opening of the Road of Gratitude, October, 1894,” Vol. 23, p. 475.



Fanny and Stevenson, with Nantoki and Natakanti, on Butaritari in the Gilberts.
'The South Seas: A Record of Three Cruises', in *Black and White*

O. Lacour
(London, 1891)